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BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH. HIS LIFE, WORKS, AND INFLUENCE. GEORGE McLEAN HARPER. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1916. 2 Vols. Vol. I, pp. xvi, 441; Vol. II, pp. 451. \$6.50.

This is a solid, engaging, and much-needed book, of a type commoner in England than in America, commoner in France than in either. It shows a German acquaintance with the enormous biographic material, a material probably more extensive than illustrates the life of any other English poet. But Professor Harper has such easy mastery of his sources, such ability to tell a story, such charm of style, and such attractiveness in his own personality, as to make it difficult to break off reading at the close of any chapter. Here we follow Wordsworth with eager interest through all his eighty years, attending him not merely from month to month, but from week to week, and at important periods from day to day. We watch the development of a human being much as if we were meeting him in the pages of a modern novel. Through letters he talks with us, his biographer supplying delightful comment. It is a piece of learned and imaginative portraiture which will form a veritable epoch in Wordsworth study.

Yet it will arouse opposition too, for it is a revolutionary book, setting aside the accredited sage of Rydal Mount and finding the true man and poet at Hawkshead, Blois, Alfoxden, and Dove Cottage. Half its pages are given to the years before 1800 which have only a subordinate place in the official biographies. The Memoirs of Bishop Wordsworth, Professor Knight, Frederic Myers, and their many followers have established a tradition of Wordsworth as an exalted, calm, ascetic, and holy being, pretty far removed from ordinary humanity. This mythical figure Professor Harper would recast. A changed scale of values is set up, a different emphasis given to old facts, and sundry important new ones are introduced. Wordsworth's remark, for example, that he wrote few love poems because he could not trust his passionate temperament has often been taken as merely another instance of his lack of humor. It looks more plausible when we read in his sister's letters of the illegitimate child left in France. While there seems to me some exaggeration in

Professor Harper's reaction against the conventional Wordsworth, I see that critical reconstruction was necessary and count it fortunate that it has been undertaken by a sober scholar who reverences and revitalizes the poet with whom since childhood he has lived in grateful intimacy.

Professor Harper regards democracy as the central principle of Wordsworth's creed and insists that in proportion as he followed this, or let it become obscure, he gained or lost power. In this I agree with him. In Wordsworth's early years he accepted a kind of democracy of nature, and never ceased to teach that the quiet eye can draw its harvest as well from common things that round us lie as from selected scenery. When on visiting Revolutionary France he at length awoke to an interest in man and society, he found the ideals of equality striven for there already familiar to him who had grown up among the freehold farmers of Cumberland. Accordingly, undertaking to exhibit in verse the workings of our elementary emotions, he naturally took his subjects from among the poor, the young, and the unlearned; and this not because he valued the peculiarities of these classes, but rather because through their very lack of peculiarities he thought them most representative of mankind in general. It was the same democratic thought which made it difficult for Jesus to imagine a rich man entering the Kingdom of Heaven. And might we not even conceive Wordsworth's famous warfare on poetic diction as but an attempt to carry democracy over into the field of language? Among words there are no fixed orders of nobility. All are good in proportion as they mean what they say. Vulgarity arises from pretence and emptiness. Plain words usually have the fullest meaning. Yet Wordsworth does not adopt a word merely because he finds it in common speech. His theory provides for selection, and in his practice he lets the "simple child" use "nay" for no, "the youth from Georgia's Shore" say that "the morning doth appear." No poet better or more frequently can charge a line with a shining word. Lucy's bones are "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course"; joy is "in widest commonalty spread"; the butterfly is "historian of my infancy"; and Myers has well remarked on Margaret's lost son, who sleeps "an incommunicable sleep." Such departures from usual speech are no acceptance of "poetic diction." They are functional, as poetic diction never is. Such words precisely fit their place. In bringing about the ease, naturalness, and conversational tone which distinguishes the poetry and oratory of today from that of a century ago, Wordsworth has had a considerable share.

Rightly then does Professor Harper lay stress on these democratic elements in the life and work of Wordsworth. Does he insist on them too exclusively? In his biographic poem, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth has made them fairly prominent. But this is not enough for Professor Harper. *The Prelude*, though written between 1798 and 1805, was not published until Wordsworth's death. Professor Harper believes — with some probability — that in the intervening years it was frequently altered. With less evidence he assumes that it originally had a more radical tone than appears at present. Émile Legouis, accepting it as it stands, finds in it a lucid account of its author's development. Professor Harper is convinced of a radicalism more extreme than it reports. He believes that Wordsworth felt in France the influence not merely of Rousseau but of the Encyclopedists. Their sceptical tendencies Professor Harper approves. Locke and Hume put English philosophy on the right road, and Wordsworth was fortunate in being guided along it from 1793 to 1798 by the great Godwin. Three times a brief remark of Coleridge is quoted, that Wordsworth "is a republican and at least half an atheist." Unhappily he grew timid and fell away from Godwinism during the struggle of England with Napoleon. He came to respect the institutions of his country, though in his championship of the Church Professor Harper thinks there was never much piety. He valued it chiefly as an engine of order. Wordsworth, in short, as Professor Harper sees him, goes over into blind Toryism. He loses touch with nature and the common man. He plays with superstitions, lives in comfort, is an officer of the government, and associates with the great. While his technical excellence increases, his poetic power fades; for he has abandoned "science" and democracy. He is in "a moral decline."

These judgments, while containing truth, appear to me harsh, unimaginative, and damaged by partisan bias. They neglect the complexities and half shades which usually enter into a great man's beliefs. No doubt it is difficult for a convinced empiricist to judge an idealist fairly. But there is a breadth and statesmanlike quality in Professor Harper which continually persuades me that he might be more subtle if he tried. Perhaps he has been irritated by early constraint. Toryism is not nice stuff for most Americans. But some Tories are not immoral, and sympathetically to examine the grounds of their strange belief is a part of the duty of a biographer.

All agree that the poetry of Wordsworth's later years is inferior to that of his earlier. But many causes worked toward this be-

sides Toryism and immorality. By the middle of his life Coleridge was lost, his brother John dead, family cares increasing, the excitement of pioneer work dulled, and the stock of natural imagery accumulated during his sensitive youth exhausted. How plaintive is his frequent lament that advancing age is substituting reason for the sensuous thrill of childhood! Wordsworth grew old early. Few poets hold imaginative fervor more than twenty-five years. Wordsworth did not, except in his sententious sonnets. But Toryism was quite as much the result of his decay as its cause. So Professor Harper often perceives, and from time to time mentions each of the contributory influences here named. But these make but a slight impression on his collective judgment. Wordsworth, he holds, reprehensibly abandoned the Godwinian type of democracy, and of course power soon departed. But did he abandon it? Did he indeed ever adopt it?

I believe Godwin's influence on Wordsworth has been greatly over-estimated, not merely by Professor Harper but by several previous biographers. *Political Justice*, published in 1793, was a popular book for the following ten years. Undoubtedly Wordsworth read it and found most of its teaching pretty familiar through what he had already heard in France. Godwin himself he knew, as a leading literary figure of London. But he never quotes his doctrines, even when in a letter his name is mentioned. Godwinism does not affect his verse, unless in its horror of war. Some passages in the later *Prelude* denounce "Reason" and "Analysis," and regret that the writer once played with matters so dangerous. But there is nothing to show that these abominable practices were suggested by Godwin, and Wordsworth returns to his hallowed "imagination" while still retaining the friendly acquaintance with Godwin intact. Coleridge certainly was for a time a disciple of the great agnostic; and at the height of his discipleship, in 1796, when he had recently become acquainted with Wordsworth, wrote to Thelwall, a forward member of the school, his hopes of a recruit — Wordsworth "is at least half an atheist." In lack of other evidence, to use this sanguine sentence as a cool estimate of Wordsworth's religious attitude is uncritical. Few writers have gone through greater changes than Wordsworth, yet few leave on their readers a deeper impression of unity. Wordsworth certainly approached religion by a path of his own. He knew and loved nature long before he loved man. His thoughts of God accordingly — ardent thoughts ever — reflect more of Him with whom nature is instinct than Him of whom history and philosophy speak. Only we must remember how near akin in Words-

worth's thoughts are the provinces of man and nature, and how spiritually nature is always conceived.

As regards Wordsworth's abandoning the principles of the Revolution, it is what most serious men of his day did. Those principles were seen to lead to bloody intolerance, anarchism, the invasion of republican Switzerland, and finally enthusiasm for an aristocratic conqueror. Wordsworth sympathized with England's struggle against Napoleon in the same way as today a former admirer of Germany sees the cause of civilization bound up with the overthrow of the Kaiser. No doubt in becoming a Tory Wordsworth was as extreme as was everywhere his habit, but he did not altogether abandon the love of liberty. Tory-democrats are not unknown in our time. In later middle life Wordsworth called himself "half a Chartist." His sonnets to Liberty are soul-stirring poems, written in large part after he ceased to be a Republican. Long after that change he lived among the peasantry, and never lost interest in the common man. I do not approve of his conservatism, especially his opposition to Catholic and Jewish emancipation and to the extension of higher education. But it is safer to trace these mistaken courses to the point where they connect with the very strength of Wordsworth's character than it is to refer them in a lump to moral decline.

Wordsworth was endowed with a double temperament. On the one hand, from early years he delighted in observing plain facts, in watching the multiplicity of things, the marks of individual character, the varied exhibit of the world's moving show. But no less strong, on the other hand, was his delight in seizing the underlying bonds which bring multiplicity to unity. His passion for finding law, harmony, beauty, order — always profound — is probably what has most impressed his readers. One of the many services of Professor Harper's book is that it brings the other, the miscellaneous, side into due prominence. Up to middle life the two remained in suitable equipoise. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth repeatedly tells us how the combination of them seen in Nature gave him a sense at once of nature's grandeur and freedom. When he first saw London he was struck with its chaotic multifariousness, was amused with it, and for the time content. Not until his second residence there did he discover an underlying unity, and so could grant the city a moral character. His experience of the French Revolution took an opposite turn. As he received its first impact, he was struck with the throb of hopeful aspiration throughout an entire people. Each was ready to sacrifice for the good of all. But as time went on, selfish-

ness supplanted patriotism; men clamored for rights of their own while refusing them to others. The principles of individuality and order parted company, and Wordsworth — how could that moral and aging man do otherwise? — threw in his lot with the latter.

Having thus sadly discerned that individuality may be a principle as well of evil as of good, Wordsworth is less disposed than formerly to furnish each person with a stock of knowledge and then leave him to direct his life for himself. Happiness does not come in that way. To most of us instinctive action and a wise passiveness — always favorite agencies with Wordsworth — bring more of it than conscious knowledge. Legislation even, clumsy and external as it is, contributes little. The collective wisdom of the past, custom, institutions, and selected men as interpreters of these august matters, are our best guides. Too much education, stimulating as it does the desire of each to realize his own novel ideals, is less helpful than the priest and poet, who lead us to idealize the realities about us. An easy creed for old age! Is it that advancing years bring timidity or wisdom?

I have developed here my divergencies from Professor Harper rather than my agreements and large indebtedness. A book is good as it forces us to rethink its subject and to adjust our minds to its fresh material. Such a stimulating book is this, and I bring it my tribute of grateful criticism. In scope, seriousness, and minute knowledge, it takes rank with Masson's *Milton*, Elwin's *Pope*, and Dowden's *Shelley*, having besides its own special distinction. Its rich scholarship never clogs its literary ease. In every chapter one lingers over passages of penetrative insight and felicitous expression. Professor Harper agrees with Matthew Arnold in counting Wordsworth the most significant force in English poetry since Milton. Most readers of this book will accept that judgment.

GEORGE H. PALMER.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

THE DRAMA OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE. A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND IDEALS. ANNIE LYMAN SEARS. The Macmillan Co. 1915. Pp. xxvi, 495. \$3.00.

There are many approaches to the study of religion in our day. Some take the historical way, and study the rise and development of religion in a given race or in the race as a whole; others pursue the psychological way and investigate the nature of religious experience and the motives which explain its rise and the needs it fulfils. Still others are interested in its philosophical problems. The author of